

OCTAVE MIRBEAU



SELECTED WRITINGS



**P R I N C I P L E S , P R O P O S I T I O N S &  
D I S C U S S I O N S  
F O R L A N D & F R E E D O M**

AN INTRODUCTORY WORD TO THE  
'ANARCHIVE'

**"Anarchy is Order!"**

*'I must Create a System or be enslav'd by  
another Man's.  
I will not Reason & Compare: my business  
is to Create'*  
(William Blake)

During the 19th century, anarchism has developed as a result of a social current which aims for freedom and happiness. A number of factors since World War I have made this movement, and its ideas, disappear little by little under the dust of history.

After the classical anarchism – of which the Spanish Revolution was one of the last representatives—a 'new' kind of resistance was founded in the sixties which claimed to be based (at least partly) on this anarchism. However this resistance is often limited to a few (and even then partly misunderstood) slogans such as 'Anarchy is order', 'Property is theft',...

Information about anarchism is often hard to come by, monopolised and intellectual; and therefore visibly disappearing. The 'anarchive' or 'anarchist archive' Anarchy is Order ( in short **A.O**) is an attempt to make the '**principles, propositions and discussions**' of this tradition available again for anyone it concerns. We believe that these texts are part of our own heritage. They don't belong to publishers, institutes or specialists.

These texts thus have to be available for all anarchists and other people interested. That is one of the conditions to give anarchism a new impulse, to let the 'new

anarchism' outgrow the slogans. This is what makes this project relevant for us: we must find our roots to be able to renew ourselves. We have to learn from the mistakes of our socialist past. History has shown that a large number of the anarchist ideas remain standing, even during the most recent social-economic developments.

**'Anarchy Is Order' does not make profits, everything is spread at the price of printing- and papercosts. This of course creates some limitations for these archives.**

**Everyone is invited to spread along the information we give . This can be done by copying our leaflets, printing from the CD that is available or copying it, e-mailing the texts ,...Become your own anarchivist!!!**

(Be aware though of copyright restrictions. We also want to make sure that the anarchist or non-commercial printers, publishers and authors are not being harmed. Our priority on the other hand remains to spread the ideas, not the ownership of them.)

The anarchivist offers these texts hoping that values like **freedom, solidarity and direct action** get a new meaning and will be lived again; so that the struggle continues against the

*'demons of flesh and blood, that sway scepters down  
here;  
and the dirty microbes that send us dark diseases and  
wish to  
squash us like horseflies;  
and the will-'o-the-wisp of the saddest ignorance'.  
(L-P. Boon)*

The rest depends as much on you as it depends on us.  
Don't mourn, Organise!

Comments, questions, criticism, cooperation can be send  
to

[A.O@advalvas.be](mailto:A.O@advalvas.be)

A complete list and updates are available on this  
address, new texts are always

**welcome!!**

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## INTRODUCING MIRBEAU (1848-1917)

### SHARIF GEMIE

1998 is the 105th anniversary of Octave Mirbeau's birth. I have been asked by Ronald Creagh to write a few paragraphs explaining his significance.

Mirbeau was an enormously productive writer, journalist and activist in late nineteenth and early twentieth century France. His politics were constantly evolving, and it is difficult to pin him down to a single political commitment. As a teenager in the 1860s he was an anti-clerical Republican; in the 1870s and early 1880s he worked as a journalist for the right-wing, particularly Bonapartist, press. During this period he wrote a number of openly anti-semitic and misogynist pieces. Then, in the mid-1880s, he had a dramatic change of heart, rejected the far right, condemned the Boulangist movement, and moved initially to a loosely defined Republican left. By 1890 his political commitments were clearer: he showed a clear preference for the anarchist left, and became friends with Jean Grave and Camille Pissarro. He wrote at length on Impressionism, believing it to be the beginning of a cultural revolution in France.

Despite his increasing physical frailty in the late 1890s, he toured the country trying to rally support for the Dreyfusard cause. In the 1900s he grew disillusioned. He worked with Jaures \*Humanite\*, but was sceptical about the future of parliamentary socialism. During the First World War he did not support the war effort, but was reluctant to condemn it while French troops were being killed.

During his life he wrote an extraordinary variety of pieces, including: plays, full length novels, travel-writing, political

polemics, short stories, reviews of books, music, art and theatre. Many of his shorter works were translated. His two best-known works are \*Le Jardin des supplices\* [the Torture Garden] and \*Le Journal d'une femme de chambre\* [the Diary of Chambermaid], later made into a film by Bunuel. One could say that these two works indicate the two sides of his personality: \*Le Jardin des Supplices\* being a pessimistic, over-lyrical, quasi-erotic novel, probably intended as an extended metaphorical representation of the Dreyfus Affair, while the \*Le Journal d'une femme de chambre\* reveals a warm, humanism, sensitive and understanding of the fate of the powerless in French society.

The best French-language work on him is Jean-Francois Nivet and Pierre Michel, *Octave Mirbeau; l'Imprecateur au coeur fidele* (Paris, 1990); the best English-language work is Reg Carr, *Anarchism in France; the Case of Octave Mirbeau* (Manchester, 1977).

There are two web-sites devoted to his work.

<http://burn.ucsd.edu/~mai/mirbeau.html> Contains a brief introduction to Mirbeau, and some well-written English translations

# A DOG'S DEATH

**OCTAVE MIRBEAU (1848-1917)**

Translated from the French by Robert Helms

"La Mort du Chien" originally appeared in the monarchist paper *Le Galois* under the pen name Henry Lys on August 23, 1884, about a year before the author's conversion to anarchism. Although most of Mirbeau's work remains untranslated, he is now regarded by French critics as one of the most important writers of his period, and his 1903 play *Business is Business* made a triumphant return to the Paris stage in 1995. He is best known to anglophone posterity for his novels *The Torture Garden* (1898) and *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1900).



His master called him Turk. He was thin, yellow, and sad, with a pointed snout, a small build, and short, badly cropped ears that were always bleeding. The tail he wore on his rump looked like a scabby question mark. In the summertime, Turk went into the fields to guard the cattle, and into the roads to chase passers-by who dealt him swift kicks and pelted him with stones. His great joy, out in a mowed field, embroidered with sprouting clover, was to come across a hare that would bolt in front of him and to pursue it across hedges, moats, and streams with long leaps and wild sprints, returning out of breath with his legs trembling and his tongue hanging out, dripping with sweat.

In the Winter, while the beasts stayed numbly in the warm beds of their stables, Turk kept to his own niche: a miserable, caved in-barrel, without straw, at the end of which he spent the days sleeping, curled up in a ball, or endlessly scratching himself. He ate a meager, stinking sustenance of larded bread scraps and dirty water, which was put out for him in the morning in a chipped stoneware bowl, and each time someone unknown to him penetrated to the center of the farm, he would lunge at them till he reached the end of his chain, and then bare his fangs and growl.

He also accompanied his master to fairs when there was a calf to sell or a pig to buy, or to stops he needed to make at the inns around the city. Otherwise, he was resigned, faithful, and miserable, just like a dog.

Once when he was coming home late from one of the more distant fairs with his master, he lost the man at a village cabaret. While his master drank a few short glasses of

Three-Six, the dog decided to run through the neighborhood, eagerly digging through heaps of garbage, trying to unearth a bone or some precious thing of that sort. When he came back into the cabaret, ashamed of his escapade and bracing himself for some thumps on the back, he found only two half-drunken farmers who didn't know him at all and who chased him off with a boot, so Turk went away.

The village was built on an intersection where six roads came together. Which one should he take? The poor dog looked puzzled at first. He cocked an ear so as to catch the sound of a familiar footstep on the wind, then he sniffed at the ground to discover the smell of fresh tracks, and then, letting out two little sighs, he swiftly departed. But soon he halted, disturbed and shivering all over. Now he walked at an angle, carefully, with his nose to the ground. He would go only a few yards into the shortcut roads that emptied into the main route, climb the embankment, smell the drunks who were sprawled out along the ditches, and then turn, spin around, retrace his steps, probing the smallest cluster of trees and the smallest clump of gorse bushes.

Night was falling. To the right and left of the road, the fields were drowned in purple shadow. As the moon rose, climbing into the smooth, cloudless sky, Turk sat down on his rump, with his neck stretched out, his head pointed straight at the astral globe, and for a long, long time he cried:

"Houou! Houou! Houou!"

Everywhere there was a grand, spreading silence.

"Houou! Houou! Houou!"

From the depths of the night, only the dogs at neighboring farms answered the sobs of the poor animal. The brilliant, magical moon steadily rose, and the dog's shadow stretched across the silver surface of the road.

Mr. Bernard, a notary, left his house at the crack of dawn and was about to start on his usual stroll. He was dressed entirely in black cashmir, as is fitting for a notary. But, as it happened to be the hieght of the Summer, Mr. Bernard figured that he could liven up his attire with an umbrella made of white alpaca. Everything was still sleeping in the town. A few bars had hardly opened their doors, and a few road-laborers with pickaxes on their shoulders had just started off to work with sleepy footsteps.

"Always up early, eh, Mr. Bernard?" asked one of them, greeting him with respect.

Mr. Bernard was about to reply --for he was not an arrogant man --when he saw approaching from the end of the wide, level Boulevard, a dog so jaundiced, so skinny, so sad, and so filthy, and who seemed so tired that Mr. Bernard instinctively stepped aside and placed himself against a plane tree. That dog was Turk --poor, lamentable Turk.

"Uh-oh!" said Mr. Bernard, "There's a dog I don't know! Uh-oh!" In small towns, one knows all the dogs, just as one knows all the citizens, and the appearance of an unknown dog is just as important and troubling an event as that of a stranger.

The dog passed in front of a fountain that stood in the center of the Boulevard, and didn't stop.

"Uh-oh!" Mr. Bernard said to himself, "This dog, who I don't know, doesn't even stop at the fountain! Uh-oh! This dog is mad: obviously it has rabies." Trembling, he armed himself with a large stone. The dog came toward him, trotting along gently with his head down.

"Uh-oh!" Mr. Bernard screamed, turning pale, "I see the foam. Uh-oh! Help! The foam! Help!"

Using the plane tree as a shield, he threw the stone, but the dog paid no attention. Turk looked at the notary with his soft eyes, turned back onto the road, and left.

In an instant, the little town was awakened by the disturbing news: a mad dog! Faces still puffy with sleep appeared at windows; animated groups of men in their shirtsleeves or women in nightshirts and caps, formed on doorsteps. The more intrepid among them were armed with pitchforks, stakes, spades, billhooks, and rakes; the joiner gesticulated with his plane, the butcher with his cleaver; the little hunchbacked shoemaker, an avid reader of mail-order dime novels with an obscene smile, proposed refined and dreadful tortures.

"Where is it? Where is it?"

While the little town raised its defenses, and all the people fired up their courage, Mr. Bernard had awakened the mayor and told him the terrible story: "It lunged at me with the foam on its teeth, Mr Mayor, and it almost bit me, Mr. Mayor!" Bernard cried out, reaching down to feel his calves, thighs, and stomach. "Oh, I've seen plenty of mad dogs in my day. Yes indeed, plenty of them. But, Mr.

Mayor, I've never, ever seen one more rabid, or more awful than this one. Oh!"

The mayor, quite dignified but also very perplexed, shook his head and reflected for a moment.

"It's serious... very serious!" he murmured. "But are you sure that he's as mad as all that?"

"As mad as all that?" shouted Bernard indignantly. "If only you could have seen it, if you could've seen that foam, those bloodshot eyes, and that fur standing on end... it wasn't even a dog anymore. It was a tiger. A tiger! A tiger!"

Then, becoming solemn, he looked straight into the mayor's face and slowly pronounced: "Listen, It's not a question of politics here, Mr. Mayor. It's a matter of public safety. Let me repeat: It's a matter of the safety and the protection of the citizens. If you shirk the responsibilities that are incumbent upon you, if you do not make a firm decision this instant, you'll soon regret it, Mr. Mayor. That's what I, Bernard, Notary Public, am saying to you!"

Mr. Bernard was the of the radical opposition and an enemy of the mayor. The latter hesitated no longer, and the rural policeman was summoned.

Turk was stretched out, tranquilly taking refuge on the square where no one dared approach him, gnawing a bone of mutton which he held between his two crossed paws. The rural policeman, armed with a rifle entrusted to him by the mayor, and followed by a sizable procession, advanced until he was ten paces from the dog. From the balcony of the town hall, the mayor, who attended the spectacle with Mr. Bernard, couldn't help but remark to him, "And yet it

eats!" in the same voice that Galileo must have used in pronouncing his famous phrase.

"Yes, he eats... the horrible animal, the sly devil!" responded Bernard, and addressing the policeman, he commanded: "Careful! Don't get so close!"

The moment took on a solemn tone. The policeman, with his cap leaning on his ear, his sleeves rolled up, and his face animated by a heroic fever, loaded his rifle.

"Don't push me!" said one voice.

"Don't miss!" said another.

"Aim at the head!"

"Not at the armpit?"

"Watch out!" yelled the policeman. Apparently uncomfortable in his cap, he sent it rolling in the dust behind him with a brusque gesture. "Stand clear!"

He took aim at the poor, lamentable dog, who had discarded his bone and now regarded the mob with a soft, teary eye, seeming not to suspect what it was that all these people wanted with him. Presently a grand silence imposed itself upon the commotion. The women stopped their ears with their fingers, not waiting for the gunshot; the men blinked their eyes, huddling against each other. An anguish gripped the crowd, in the expectation of something extraordinary and horrible. The policeman steadily held his aim.

**BOOM! BOOM!**

At the same moment there pealed out a cry of prolonged and piercing pain, a bellowing that filled up the town. The dog stood up. Hobbling on three legs, he fled, letting little drops of blood fall behind him. And while the dog ran and ran, the rural policeman looked at his rifle, stupefied; the dumbfounded crowd looked at the policeman, and the mayor stared open-mouthed at Mr. Bernard, overcome with horror and indignation.

Turk ran all day, dancing pitifully on his three legs, bleeding, stopping sometimes to lick the wound, then stumbling off again; he ran through roads, fields, and villages. But everywhere the terrifying news of a rabid dog preceded him: its eyes are haggard; its fur is standing on end; its drooling mouth is smeared with crimson froth. The villages were in arms and the farms were bristling with scythes. Stones flying everywhere, blows from clubs, shots from rifles! His body was no more than a single wound, one horrid wound made of hacked living flesh, leaving blood in the dust of the roadways, reddening the grass, and coloring the stream in which he bathed. He kept running and running, tripping over rocks, clods of earth, and clumps of vegetation, followed incessantly by the cries of death.

Toward evening, he entered into a field of tall, ripe corn, where a breeze was softly rocking the golden ears back and forth. With his sides heaving and his legs stiff, Turk collapsed on a bed of poppies, and there, as some scattering partridges called back and the crickets sang, he died without uttering a complaint, surrounded by the murmurs of Nature herself, who lulled him to sleep and who summons the souls of the poor dogs that sleep on the brilliant and magical Moon.

THE END

# **BEFORE THE BURIAL**

**OCTAVE MIRBEAU (1848-1917)**

Translated from the French by Robert Helms

"Avant L'Enterrement" first appeared in the Paris newspaper Gil Blas on April 19, 1887

Mr. Poivret got down from his wagon in front of the shop owned by his son-in-law Pierre Gasselin, tied the horse to a thick iron ring and, after three times checking the tightness of the tether's knot, he entered the butcher shop cracking his horse-whip.

"Anyone there?" he yelled.

A dog, sleeping with its body stretched across a sunny patch of floor, got up with a low groan and then laid itself out a little farther out of the way. The store was deserted, and since it was Thursday, the meat rack was pretty close to empty. A quarter of nearly black beef lay on the block, covered with flies, and a lamb's heart, split down the middle, was hanging from the ceiling on one of the movable hooks. In a corner, in the bottom of a copper basin, some bloody bones and heaps of yellowing grease were beginning to spoil. From that direction an odor rose up: that weakening smell of death that sickens the stomach in a hospital or at a mass grave.



"Anybody home?" repeated Poivret. "Hey, Gasselin! Where are you?"

Gasselin came out of the Cafe Gadaud, located just across the street from his shop. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, relit his pipe, and rushed over saying "Here I am! Here I am!"

He was without a hat, his chubby face all red and clean shaven and his sleeves rolled up almost to the elbows. His white cloth apron, stained by a constellation of red splotches, covered him from the blue scarf loosely wrapped around his neck almost to his wooden clogs. The tops of his feet were bare, and a sharpening rod danced along his left leg at the end of a steel chain. He walked up to his father-in-law and offered his hand.

"You're lookin' good --how are you?"

"Not bad, my boy," said the older man, "not bad at all."  
"Can I get some oats for your horse?"

"Hell no! He ate and drank this morning. I'm coming from the Chassant fair, my boy!"

"Now that's a nice fair!" Gasselin declared.

Poivret nodded his head and answered tersely. "Yeah, yeah. Not so good, not so bad, either. The prices are decent." Changing his tone, he said, "Little Auguste gave me the bad news when I got to Mansonniere."

"Yep..." chirped Gasselin. "Yes indeed!"

"Anyhow, I've gotten unhitched, I've given only four quarts of oats to my horse, and here I am, finally."

"You wanna go freshen up?" asked Pierre Gasselin.

"Well, I can't say no to that. My mouth feels like an oven. Anyway, it's no joke, then? She's up'n died, your wife?"

The butcher took his pipe and shook out the ashes on the point of one of his clogs. "She's really dead," he said. "Last night at the stroke of ten. Yeah, or maybe ten-thirty. Well, around there somewhere --whatever!"

"Last night?" asked Poivret, rocking his head from side to side. "Well, well, well! Did you see it? What did she catch? Was it a case of rabies, or blood poisoning?"

"It wasn't blood poisoning, Mr. P, and not an infection either," explained Gasselin. "It was a stomach thing. Her stomach puffed out. But I mean way out! And she cried and cried. Jeez, the way she cried! Worse yet, now she's dead. Can you believe it? But there was something else I was thinkin'..."

"What was that, my boy?"

"Oh, well, here it is. Fifteen days ago, or maybe twelve, maybe more, maybe less --well let's say fifteen days ago, your daughter was givin' me some shit. I think she called me a pig and a drunk because of a party I had with the Bacoup boys and the Maute boys. Anyway, I told her to shut up --but gently, without anger. With love, actually! But sure enough, she plagued me with more bullshit, only worse this time! The really bad thing was that I gave her a good smack, and a kick in the gut. But hey, look, Mr. P, I was

only foolin' around. I didn't mean any harm. I wouldn't hurt her. Anyway, where was I? The next morning, she was complaining, 'I don't know what's in my stomach. There's gotta be something in my stomach. An animal --a big animal that's eating me alive!' This didn't stop her from taking care of the customers, though. Then, the day before yesterday, it came back, only worse. She was layin' down, and she'd puffed up! And she howled and screamed like a banshee! Finally, she was dead! I'll be damned, but I'd never believe that a little kick in the gut, in fun like that, not in anger, could kill a woman just like that."

Poivret scratched the back of his neck and repeated, in a dreamy voice, "Well, well, well. That's the way it goes!" And he went on with a sorrowful, resigned air, "Dust into dust. It's like her mother Mrs. Poivret, my late wife. She was dead in the wink of an eye! The tree hit her on the back of the head. You know the one --the big walnut that's sacred to the farm?"

"Yes, of course!" groaned Gasselin. "Maybe you wanna take a look at your daughter? She's upstairs, Mr. P."

"It's all the same to me," Poivret replied. "Let's go and see her!" And the two of them went through the back of the shop, where they climbed a hidden staircase and halted at the top, in front of a door that lay ajar.

The father-in-law said to his son-in-law, "You go in!" "No, you go in, Mr. P!"

"No, no, my boy. You first."

They entered the bedroom, walking on tiptoe. Poivret had removed his hat and was respectfully turning it in his hand.

His little eyes had become large and round. He squeezed his mouth shut into two folding creases that gave his appearance a singular expression of comic fright and compressed emotion. He looked around him.

The figure of a woman was lying on the bed with the head thrown back, the features frightfully drawn, the complexion leaden, and the body rigid under a cloth that molded itself around the projecting parts and the form of the cadaver. Her hands, which lay crossed over her chest, held a crucifix. Near the bed an old woman sat up and prayed, and near her, on a lace covered table, two candles burned, flanking a larger crucifix with their sad glow. An "aspergeoir" made of birch twigs soaked in a reddish clay pot of holy water.

Mr. Poivret crossed himself and approached the bed. For a few minutes he observed his daughter, sometimes leaning over as though he would embrace her, and then suddenly righting himself, overcome by a vague fear that he would have been unable to explain. Finally, he placed his fat, knotty hand on the hand of the dead woman, but immediately retrieved it and made a pained grimace, as a man does when he's been burned by a hot iron. He went to rejoin his son-in-law, who was lingering in the middle of the room, and told him in a deep voice:

"She sure is dead! And she's cold --I'll be damned if she ain't cold!" Going back down the stairs, pale and embarrassed, they were troubled, in spite of themselves, by the grand mystery of death, about which they understood nothing.

"Damned if she ain't cold!" he repeated, the rhythm of his exclamation followed the muffled sound of his clogs on the stairs.

"And yellow, huh? Wasn't she yellow?" Gasselin responded. In the shop, the two men looked at each other, and the son-in-law asked, "Maybe you'd like a drink to help you calm down?"

"Sure! I sure would!" The father-in law thanked him. "And to think that not five days ago, she was as fit as a fiddle. Well! Get a load of that!"

They slowly crossed the street, with Poivret muttering, "You've gotta know she was cold!" and Gasselin countering, "And yellow, eh, Mr. P?" At a table in the cafe, with a bottle of wine between them, they were silent at first. Poivret refilled the glasses, pouring from high in the air.

"To your health," he said.

"And to yours, sir," replied Gasselin.

Afterward, they chatted about the price of meat, the quality of various pastures, and the Chassant fair. Poivret complained that we weren't selling as much cattle as we used to.

"If it weren't for the Spaniards and the Americans buying our stock, what would we be selling?"

When they got up after two bottles, they were feeling much better. Poivret said to Gasselin, "We're not done yet, my boy. When do we bury her?"

"Oh, yeah. That's another problem. Tomorrow, Friday? Beats me!"

The father-in-law approved. "Good. All right, then."

"Wait... I can't bury her tomorrow!" "Nope! Sure can't!"

"Saturday's the market!"

"Okay, fine!"

"And I can't let my meat spoil."

"Nope. No way."

"It's pretty embarrassing, Mr. P."

There were a few minutes of silence. Mr. Poivret thought about it carefully. Finally, in a confidential tone, he said carefully, "I was going to say... it's just that, well, she'll spoil too, the poor girl."

"For sure! Definitely!"

"And that would make all the meat go bad!"

"Damned right! It's true! So what're we gonna do, Mr. P? Huh? Whatta we do?"

Poivret's face took on a grave expression as he gave it some more thought, cradling his chin in his palm. Finally he made a wide sweep of his hand and proposed:

"Let's crack open another bottle."

THE END

# ELECTIONS

OCTAVE MIRBEAU

Translated by Robert Helms

"Des ilections" first appeared in La France (Paris), Aug.12, 1885.

What's going to happen? Where will we flee? Already the election campaigns are infected by a terrible leprosy. The cabarets roar, rolling over with drunken eyes. Looming above the intersections, the red, blue, and yellow posters explode across the walls of solitary houses. The peasants hurry to gather their wheat and oats before the political whirlwind blows in, like a devastating sirocco. The bad smell of spilled wine is hanging in the air, and the deafening clamour of committees comes from everywhere, left, right, and center, calling for an encore, and marking time on the bass drum of alcoholic frenzy.

People walk by, cross themselves, don't recognize each other, and see each other as enemies. In all eyes there is a challenge, on every lip a bitterness, and a threat is carried in every fist. A silent war has flared up in the finest hearts, and already we've seen two young people, who love each other as brothers, get into an argument in the village assembly, and spill each others' blood into the dust, when just yesterday they were out dancing merrily with their fiancées. We no longer count the broken marriages, and everyone is playing hide and seek with the sheriff.

The Countess Verdurette is a generous person. We see her everywhere, always gay, charming, and friendly, and not at all snobbish. She visits the notary and the tax collector, goes in herself to buy outdated canned food from the grocer, carries grafts of exotic rose plants to the home of the old justice of the peace, and sends baskets of oysters to the doctor. Besides using Landaus, mail coaches, and Victorias, she also uses the prehistoric carriages, with springs that squeal, axles that rattle, and threadbare seat-cushions of old serge. The Count himself has stopped wearing his elegant outfits. He goes around in a faded hat, a crumpled jacket, big old work boots, and with an ash-wood cane in his hand. He hardly dares to greet the parish priest (an unpopular man whose blunders have a way of compromising others), but in revenge he pats the stomach of the shoemaker, and liberally lends a hand to the veterinarian. The country takes advantage of his good disposition. His rabbit warrens have all been slaughtered, we flush out all of his baby pheasants from their nests, and cut out the best trees from clusters in the woods on his property. The gamekeeper is at his wits' end, because he's been ordered not to write a single summons.

On the sides of the roads, there are always these suspicious-looking people who we don't know and who we've never seen, following one after the other, constantly greeting everyone, and even greeting the trees, the rocks, the stray cows, and the mad dogs. They are our good candidates. Some wear long beards, while others are clean-shaven. Some are old and bent, others young and full of pep. But they all have the same smile and sing the same tune, which echoes from the valleys to the hills, and then from the hills to the mountains. "



Listen to me, good people, rich and poor, honest and larcenous. You, too, deaf and lame, paraplegics --look at me, and listen. It is I who makes the harvest plentiful, I who turns the miserable cottage into a palace, I who fills the old, empty coffers with gold, and I who crams the poisoned hearts full of happiness. Hurry over here, good people, for I am the savior for sterile women, and for anxious, obedient people. I say to the hail, DO NOT FALL; to the war, DO NOT KILL; and to death, DO NOT COME. I turn the stinking piss of mares into fine wine, and delicious honey flows out of thorns when I touch them."

Here is what I saw: while the candidate was speaking, a crowd materialized and gathered around him.

"Kind Sir," wept an old woman, "I have a son who's off in the war, far, far away."

"I will return him to you."

"I have only one leg," said a crippled man.

"I'll give you another one."

"Look at this horrible sore that eats away at my side!" wailed a wretched fellow in the most pathetic cries.

"I'll lay a medal of honor on your sore with my own hands, and you will be cured."

"I'm ninety years old," croaked an old man.

"I'll get you back to forty."

"It's been three days since I had a scrap of bread to eat!" a beggar pleaded.

"I'll stuff you with cakes."

Then a murderer appeared brandishing a long knife, with his clothes all drenched in blood.

"I've killed my brother, and now I'm off to prison!" he shrieked.

"I'll tear down the prisons, and slaughter justice with the guillotine. Then I'll make you a cop."

"My neighbor is too rich," said a peasant, "his rabbits eat my corn, and his foxes snatch my chickens."

"I'll install you on my own land, and you can nail his children to the barn doors, like screech-owls." (1)

"That little scum just doesn't want to beat my ponds anymore," said the rich neighbor. (2)

"I'll crucify him on one of the elms along your driveway."

"Those damned colonies are taking all of our fine young men, Sir!" a young woman sighed.

"I'll abolish the colonies."

"I don't have enough costumers to buy my products!" exclaimed the industrialist.

"I will push our field of conquest straight to the end of the world."

"Long live the Republic," said a voice.

The candidate responded, "Long live the Republic!"

"Long live the King," said another voice.

The candidate responded, "Long live the King!"

"Long live the Emperor," said a third voice.

The candidate responded, "Long live the Emperor!"

At that moment, a beautiful, superbly-dressed woman stepped from the ranks of the crowd, and walked up to the candidate.

"Do you know me?" she asked.

"No," replied the candidate, "where should I have seen you, you lousy foreigner?"

"I am France. What will you do for me?"

"The same as I'll do for the others, dear. I'll eat, I'll sleep, and my stomach will feel better for the grease. With the money I'll be taking from your pocket, that bottomless paunch, I'll have beautiful women, fertile lands, and respectability in the bargain, if you don't mind. And if you're not happy about it, that's no problem, sweetheart. I'll just have to work you over with my stick!"

THE END

## Notes:

1 There was a superstitious fear of owls in rural France, as they were thought to be connected with the devil for their nocturnal cries. When caught, they would often be impaled alive by farmers.

2 In order to keep the frogs from croaking and disturbing their sleep, landlords would force tenant farmers to stay up all night, splashing the edges of their private lakes with sticks.

# RAVACHOL

OCTAVE MIRBEAU

Translated and introduced by Robert Helms

Francois-Claudius Koenigstein (Oct. 14, 1859 -- July 11, 1892), known to posterity as Ravachol, was born to Dutch and French parents at Saint-Chamond, near St. Etienne in Eastern France. He was angered by two actions taken by the French government on May 1, 1891. One was at Fourmies, where the newly designed Lebel's machine gun was used against a peaceful May Day rally at which women and children were carrying flowers and palms. Casualties there numbered 14 dead and 40 wounded. The other incident was at Clichy, where police attacked a six-man anarchist labor rally. The workers defended themselves with pistol-shots and were subsequently given long terms at hard labor.

Ravachol took retribution for the Clichy defendants by bombing the homes of the presiding judge (Mar. 11, 1892) and the prosecutor (Mar. 27, 1892). During the same month he bombed the Lobau Barracks in Paris in response to the Army's slaughter of innocents at Fourmies. These three attentats caused extensive property damage, but no deaths. Ravachol was pointed out to police by a waiter in a restaurant, and then on the night before his trial began on April 25, the restaurant was bombed, killing its owner. A long cycle of vendetta between the anarchists and the government was to follow.

Ravachol's first trial resulted in a sentence of life at forced labor. Octave Mirbeau's article appeared the following week in *L'Endehors*, 52 (May 1, 1892), giving one of the most balanced anarchist views of Ravachol's terrorist activity. Two months later, though, he was extradited to Montbrison in his native region and condemned to death for the killings of an old hermit and a certain landlady he once knew. Before his death Ravachol denied having committed these murders, but he admitted to some burglaries and grave-robbings. He was beheaded at Montbrison and buried there. Today, Ravachol is an important cult hero among French anarchists.

His head escapes the guillotine!

The jurors who have dared to do this, who covered their ears to the barking clamors of death, --were they afraid? Were they afraid to kill a man whose mysterious vengeance won't entirely die with him? Or indeed, beyond the act itself, the awesome horror of which was being howled at them, did they hear the voice of that forward-looking idea, the dominant idea that specifically characterizes this act and ennoble it? I don't know. One never knows what can happen in the conscience of a juror, or what ultimate compulsion he obeys, when dishing out life and death.

The jurors didn't tremble as much as the press that sneered at them, abused them, and damned them. The press wanted blood. Just like the crude middle class, whose blind instincts they reflect, and whose threatened privileges they defend, the journalists are afraid. And fear is a savage thing. For to give itself the illusion of a

fierce courage, fear likes to apply rouge to its pale features. They believe, also, that the sound of the legal blade, and the sound of mutilated flesh bouncing on that infamous plank, can drown out the sound of the grinding teeth, the racing pulses, and the voices which grow bolder and angrier every day, boiling up from the hellish underbelly of society. The press is mistaken. There are certain corpses that walk again, and certain voices that won't be stifled. And the void is filled with terrible enigmas.

I am horrified by the bloodshed, the ruins, and the death; I love life, and all life is sacred to me. This is why I'm going to ask for the anarchist ideal which no form of government can create: love, beauty, and peace between men. Ravachol doesn't frighten me. He is as transient as the terror he inspires. He is the thunder clap that is followed by the glory of the sun and the calm sky.

Beyond the somber task at hand smiles the admirable Kropotkin's dream of universal harmony.

Besides, our society has no right to complain, since it has given birth to Ravachol: it sowed misery, and reaped revolution.

This is just.

And this begs the question...

Who is it --throughout this endless procession of tortures which has been the history of the human race --who is it that sheds the blood, always the same, relentlessly, without any pause for the sake of mercy? Governments, religions, industries, forced labor camps, all of these are

drenched in blood. The murder is weary of their laws, their prayers, and their progress. Again just recently, there were the frenzied butchers who turned Paris into a slaughterhouse as the Commune perished. There were pointless massacres, such as at Fourmies where the bodies of innocent women and little kids tried out the ballistic virtues of the Lebel's machine gun for the first time. And there are always the mines in which fifty, a hundred, or five hundred poor devils are suffocated, swallowed in a single moment of horrible destruction, their charred bodies never to see daylight again. And there are also the horrid conquests of distant countries where happy races, unknown and peaceful, groan under the boot of that robber of continents, that filthy rapist of forest communities and virgin lands, the western slave trader.

Each footstep taken in this society bristles with privileges, and is marked with a bloodstain; each turn of the government machinery grinds the tumbling, gasping flesh of the poor; and tears are running from everywhere in the impenetrable night of suffering. Facing these endless murders and continuous tortures, what's the meaning of society, this crumbling wall, this collapsing staircase?

We live in ugly times. The misery has never been worse, because it's never been more obvious, and it's never stood closer to the spectacle of wasted riches and the promised land of well-being from which it is relentlessly turned away. Never has the law, which protects only the banks, pressed so hard upon the tortured shoulders of the poor. Capitalism is insatiable, and the wage system compounds the evils of ancient slavery. The shops are packed full of clothing, and there are those who go about



completely naked; the indifferent rich are puking up food, while others perish from hunger in their doorways. No cry is heeded: whenever a single, louder complaint penetrates the din of sad murmurs, the Lebel is loaded and the troops are mobilized.

And that's not all.

A population does not live solely on its stomach. It also has a life of the mind. Its intellectual joys are just as necessary as its physical joys. It has a right to beauty just as it has a right to bread. Indeed, those who could give it its higher pleasures, those who could introduce to the people this vital beauty are treated like public enemies, hunted down as criminals, hounded for being anarchists and beaten like beggars. They are reduced to a solitary life. An enormous barrier separates them from the crowd, by whom they are regarded as repulsive spectacles, and over whom there is spread the enormous, sordid, impenetrable veil of triumphant stupidity. We are witnessing an incredible social moment: at this time, while abundant with great thinkers, the public taste has never been so degraded, nor has ignorance ever enjoyed such base pleasures. Surely, if the hour in which we live is hideous, it is formidable as well: it's the hour of popular awakening. And this hour is full of uncertainty. The patience of the downtrodden and the dispossessed has lasted long enough. They want to live, they want to enjoy, they want their share of all the happiness and sunshine. Whatever the rulers do, reacting to their worst fears, they will not forestall the inevitable course of events. We're touching upon a decisive moment in human history. The old world is collapsing under the weight of its own crimes, and is itself lighting the fuse of the bomb that will blast it all away. This bomb will be all

the more terrible because it will contain neither  
gunpowder nor dynamite. It'll contain compassion and an  
idea; two forces against which nothing can be done.

## THE BABY

OCTAVE MIRBEAU (1848-1917)

Translated from the French by Robert Helms

"L'Enfant" originally appeared in the Paris periodical La France on October 21, 1885.

Motteau gave his testimony as follows:

"There you have it, your honor. You've listened to all these people --my good neighbors and my good friends. They haven't cut me any slack, and that's fair enough. They felt uncomfortable as long as I was in Boulaie-Blanche, and as long as there were no cops between them and the barrels of my shotgun. They may not like me, of course, but they're careful not to let their hatred show, because they know that Motteau is not someone to be played with. Today, it's a different story. See? I shrug my shoulders and I laugh in spite of myself.

"Maheu --one-eyed Maheu --who's come to tell you that I'm a murderer and a thief --OK, fine! It was Maheu that, last year at the Gravoire Auction, killed Blandé's guard. I was with you, you hoodlum, I don't deny it. And Léger, the hunchback who was churning out hypocrisies a minute ago --Léger robbed the church of Pontillou six months ago. Oh, he won't have the balls to deny it. We pulled that one off together, --ain't that right, Léger?

"You don't know, do you, your honor, who it was that wrung the neck of Monsieur Jacquinet, that night when

he was coming home from the Feuillet Fair? You've thrown a lot of innocent people in jail for that one, after your endless investigations. It's Sorel --Sorel who demanded my head a moment ago, OK? What? Ain't you gonna protest, comrade? There's no way he can, don't you see? While he strangled the old guy, I went through his pockets --ha! This surprises you? But look at them! We're not proud anymore, are we, boys? We're not arrogant. We're turning pale, we're shaking, and we're saying to ourselves that when we turn in Motteau for the same thing we want to clear ourselves of, we're just turning ourselves in, and the same guillotine is going to cut through all of our necks.

"Your honor, what I'm telling you is the truth, and you can believe me. We're all like this in Boulaie-Blanche. Blessed Mother! You better believe it! For two leagues, all around the hamlet, there's nothing but heather and gorse bushes on the one side, and nothing but sand and rocks on the other. Here and there are some thin little birch trees, and then of course plenty of those stunted pines that can't really grow. The cabbages, even --they won't come up in our gardens at all! The place is cursed. How do you expect us to live in it? Oh, there's the Bureau of Charity, isn't there? Come on --it's just a cute little joke. It gives nothing, or, it gives you nothing unless you're rich. And so, since we're not far from the woods, we begin by doing some poaching. Sometimes this brings in something, but then there's the dead season, and besides that there's the guards who'll track you down, and trials, and jail. My God --jail! Here we go again! We're fed, then we build traps while we're waiting to get out. I ask you, judge, what would you do in our place? Would you work somewhere else? Go and get a job on a farm? The problem is, when we say we're from

Boulaie-Blanche, it's as though we'd just come in from hell. They run us out of there with their pitch forks. So we've got to steal! And when someone makes up his mind to steal, he must decide to kill. The one thing doesn't go without the other. If I tell you everything here today, it's because you've got to know what's what in Boulaie-Blanche, and that the fault really lies with the authorities, who never bother to do anything for us, and who isolate us from life like mad dogs, or as if we had the plague.

"Now I'll get to the present business.

"I got married just about a year ago, and my wife got pregnant in the first month. I gave it some thought: a baby to feed, when we can't even feed ourselves --it's stupid. 'We have to make it disappear!' I told my wife. Fortunately, close to our place there's an old woman who wanders around, and she's good at working out schemes like this. In return for a hare and two rabbits that I gave her, she brought my wife some plants and then some powders that she put together to make --I don't know what concoction to drink. This didn't do a thing -- nothing. The old hobo lady told us, 'Don't worry yourselves: it's as good as dead. I tell you it'll come out dead.' Since she had a reputation around the neighborhood for being a sorceress who knows her stuff, I didn't concern myself any further. I said to myself, 'That's good, then. It'll come out dead.' But she lied, the old thief, as you'll see in a minute.

"One night, under a beautiful moon, I killed me a roe deer. I was coming back with the deer on my back, and I was all happy, because you just about never get a deer, on any night. It was around three in the morning when I

got back to my place. There was a light in the window. This surprised me, so I beat on the door, which is always barricaded from inside when I'm not around. It didn't open. I knocked some more, a little harder. Then I hear this little crying, and some cursing, and then a sort of dragging step that was dragging across the tiles. And what do I see? My wife is half naked, pale as a corpse, and all splashed with blood. First I thought that somebody'd tried to kill her, but she said to me, 'Not so much noise, idiot! Can't you see I'm havin' the baby?' Holy shit! It had to come one of these days, but then when it did come, I was caught completely off guard. I came in, threw the deer in a corner, and hung my shotgun on a nail.

"Did it come out dead at least?" I asked my wife.

"Oh, yeah, dead --just take a look!" she says to me, and I see on the bed, in a bunch of bloody rags, some naked thing wiggling around.

"I looked at my wife, she looked at me, and for five minutes or so, we were quiet.

"Were you cryin'?" I asked her.

"No!"

"Did you hear somebody prowlin' around outside?"

"No!"

"Why'd you have the light on?"

"It wasn't two minutes the candle was lit, before you knocked," she told me.

"All right', I said. Then I grabbed the baby by the feet, and real quick, like we do with rabbits, I gave it a good belt in the head. After that I stuck it in my game bag and I got my shotgun down again. You can believe me if you want, yer honor, but I swear, through the whole thing I never even knew if it was a girl or a boy.

"I went to the Grand Pierre spring. All around, as far as you can see, there was nothing but some scattered heather, growing in between the piles of rocks. Not a tree or a house stood nearby, not even a path that led to the place! As for living creatures, you'll only see some sheep grazing up there, and some shepherds, when there's no more grass down in the fields. Right by the spring there's a deep clay quarry that's been abandoned for a few hundred years. Some undergrowth hides the open mouth of the pit from your eye. That's where I go to hide my gun, and to hide myself when the cops are payin' me a visit. Who would dare to venture into that deserted place, which people seriously believe is haunted by ghosts? Nothing to fear. I threw the baby in the quarry, and I heard the sound of it hitting the bottom: 'Plunk!' Daylight was breaking, very pale, behind the hill.

"Coming back, in the path from Boulaie-Blanche, I spotted a gray form behind the hedge, something like the back of a man or a wolf, --you can't always make things out so well, in the half-light, even if you do it all the time --and it was sliding softly, crouching down low, creeping along, and it stopped.

"Hey!' I yelled in a loud voice. 'If you're a man, show yourself or I'll shoot!'

"Look, Motteau, it's me!' said the form, standing up all of a sudden. "'Yeah, it's me,' I said, 'and don't forget, Maheu, there's a load of buckshot in my gun for nosy people.'

"And he says, 'Oh, no problem! I'm resetting my traps. But you know... it's not only the deer that squeal when you kill them.'

"No!' I told him, 'There's also chicken-shits like you, you ugly one-eyed fuck!' I aimed at him, but I didn't shoot --I don't know why. I was wrong. Next day, Maheu went to get the cops.

"Now listen to me carefully, your honor. There are thirty households in Boulaie-Blanche: that's to say thirty women and thirty men. Have you counted how many living kids there are in those thirty households? There are only three. And the others --the suffocated ones, the strangled ones, the buried ones: in other words, the dead ones --have you counted them? Go and dig up the ground, down there in the skinny shadows of the birches, or at the feet of those scrawny pines. Drop a pole down into the wells. Turn over the gravel and sweep the sand away from the quarries. Under the birches and the pines, at the bottoms of the wells, mixed in with the sand and the pebbles, you'll see more bones of newborns than there are bones of men and women in the graveyards of the big cities. Go into the houses and ask the men, both young and old, what they've done with all the babies their wives have carried! Put the question to Maheu, Léger, Sorel --everyone!

"All right! Maheu, you see that it's not just the deer that squeal when you kill them."

END



# THE JUSTICE OF THE PEACE

OCTAVE MIRBEAU (1848-1917)

Translated from the French by Robert Helms

"La Justice de Paix" first appeared in *La France* on July 24, 1885, and was later anthologized in *Lettres de ma Chaumiere*, dedicated to Guy de Maupassant.

The Justice of the Peace occupied a ground floor hearing room in the village's town hall that looked out onto the square. The stark, tiled room was divided in the middle by a sort of railing made of white wood, which served as a bench for both the plaintiffs and the lawyers, and on the days of big trials, for the curious. At the end, on a low platform of badly joined planks, stood three small tables. The one in the middle was reserved for his honor the judge, the one on the right was for the clerk, and the one on the left for the sheriff. Behind them there was a Christ hanging on the wall, floating all alone in an unguilded frame, covered in fly droppings.

At the moment I entered, a hearing was in full swing. The room was filled with farmers, leaning on their long ashwood canes fitted with black leather straps, and with peasant women carrying heavy covered baskets, from which red rooster-combs, yellow duck-bills, and rabbit ears protruded. Cowshed and stable were represented by a strong odor. The judge was a small, clean-shaven, balding man with a ruddy face, dressed in a rough cloth vest. He was paying close attention to the discourse of an old woman who stood on the platform, accompanying

every word with an expressive and colorful gesture. The hairy, bloated clerk seemed to be asleep with his head resting on his folded arms, while just across from him a skinny sheriff scribbled --the devil knows what --on a stack of thick files.

The old woman stopped talking and stood silent. "Is that all?" the judge inquired.

"Pardon me, your honor?," asked the plaintiff, stretching out a neck as long and wrinkled as a chicken's leg.

"I'm asking if you've finished this yarn about your wall?" the magistrate repeated in a louder voice.

"Yes, of course, your honor. That is, if you'll allow me, that's the story. The wall in question, along which Jean-Baptiste Macé attached his..."

She was about to go into the atecedants, but the judge interrupted her. "That's fine, that's fine. Leave it at that, Martine. We'll put it on the schedule. Clerk!"

The clerk slowly raised his head, his face looking hideous. "Clerk!" he repeated, "Take a note. Put this on the schedule."

Then, counting on his fingers, "Tuesday. We'll set it for Tuesday, then. That's it --next case!"

The clerk blinked his eyes, looked at a paper, turned it over and ran his finger up from the bottom of the page. His finger stopped abruptly in the middle.

"Gatelier vs. Rousseau!" he yelled out, without moving.  
"Are they here, Gatelier and Rousseau?"

"Present," said one voice.

"Here I am." said another.

The two farmers got up and stepped onto the platform. They clumsily placed themselves in front of the judge, who stretched his arms out on the table and crossed his calloused hands.

"Go ahead, Gatelier. What is it this time, my boy?"

Gatelier waddled back and forth on his heels, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looked to his right, then to his left, scratched his head, spit, and then finally he crossed his arms and spoke.

"Here it is, yer honor. We was comin' home from Saint Mike's fair --me, my wife Mrs. Gatelier, and Rouse, all together. We'd sold two calves, and a pig, too! Anyhow, if you don't mind me sayin' so, we was a bit sloshed, and we was comin' home when it's gettin' dark. Me, I was singin', and Rouse was botherin' my wife, so Mrs. G. says, after a while, 'Cut it out already, Rouse, fer God's sake! You're such a pig ...and such a child!'

Turning toward Rousseau, he asked, "Ain't it so?" "Yep, that's true!" said Rousseau.

"Around half way home," Gatelier resumed after a short silence, "my wife climbs up the embankment, steps over the little hedge, which has a big ditch behind it, and I ask her, 'Where you goin'?' and she tells me, 'To take a leak.'

I said, 'OK, fine!' and we kept on walkin,' Rousse and me. After a few steps, there's Rousse, climbin' up the bank, steppin over the little hedge with the big ditch behind it, and I ask him, 'where you goin'?' and he says, 'to take a leak.' I said, 'OK, fine!' and I kept on walkin'."

Again he turned toward Rousseau.

"Ain't it so?" he asked.

"Sure it is!" Rousseau replied "Anyhow", Gatelier continued, "I kept on goin'. I walked and walked and walked. Then I turned around, and there's nobody on the road. I said to myself: 'that's funny! Where c'n they have gone off to?' and I back-tracked a ways, and I'm thinkin,' 'It's been quite a while. It's true that we're all a little tipsy, but it's still been a long time.' So I get to the spot where Rousse had climbed up the bank, and I climb the hedge and look in the ditch, and I say, 'Oh my God, there's Rousse on top of my wife!' Pardon me --I'm sorry, yer honor, but that's what I said.

A few scattered laughs were heard in the audience, but Gatelier paid no attention. He went on with his narrative:

"So Rousse was on my wife, and he's wrigglin' around in the ditch. You should have seen the way that damned Rousse was a-wigglin' around. Damn it! That bastard! Lousy good-fer-nothin'!"

"Hey, fella,' I yelled from the hedge, 'hey, Rousse! Stop it, ya pig, stop it!' It was like I was talkin' to the wall. The more I told him to stop, the harder he'd be wrigglin', fer chrissake! Anyhow, I go down in the ditch and grab Rousse by the shirt, and I'm pullin' and pullin'. Lemme

finish' he tells me. And my wife says to me, 'yeah, let 'im finish'. 'Look, buddy,' he repeated, 'let me get finished here and I'll give ya five francs! Ya hear me, man? Five francs!' So I let go of his shirt and say, 'Five francs, eh? D'ya mean it?' And he says, 'I mean it!'

'You swear it?' ...'I swear!'

'Give it to me now.' ...'No. When I'm finished.'

'OK, so finish!' I said, and I start walkin' back on the road."

For the third time Gatelier turned to Rousseau for confirmation.

"Ain't that how it went?"

"That's how it went!" Rousseau replied. Satisfied with that, Gatelier raised his voice.

"Listen, yer honor, please listen. It was a promise. It was swore! When he was all finished, he gets back on the road with Mrs. Gatelier, where I was sittin' and waitin' for them. 'How 'bout my five francs?' I ask 'im.

'T'morrow', he tells me, "cause I only got a couple o' sous on me.' Now this coulda been true, or it mighta been a lie. I didn't say nothin', and we kept goin' on our way, Mrs. G, my wife, and Rouse, all together. Me, I was singin', Rouse was botherin' my wife, and she was sayin' all the time, 'Cut it out, Rouse, fer chrissake! Yer such a pig! Yer such a child!' and when we separated I says to Rouse, 'Hey, look, buddy, we have an agreement, right?' and he says, 'I swear it. Then he gives me a handshake, he makes nice with my wife, and off he

goes. And since that time, seriously, judge, he's never wanted to gimme my five francs. And what makes it even worse is that, as lately as the day b'fore yesterday, when I came to get my money, he calls me a cuckold! He says to me, 'Fuck you, ya lousy cuckold'. That's what he told me."

Again he turned to Rousseau and asked, "Ain't that true?"

Rousseau shifted his weight from one leg to the other a few times, but made no reply.

The judge was becoming really perplexed. He rubbed his jaw with his hand, looked over at the clerk, then at the sheriff, as though asking for their opinions. Evidently he found the case difficult.

"Huh! Hmmm..." he muttered, and then he quietly reflected for a few minutes.

"How about you, Mrs. Gatelier, what've you got to say about this?" he asked a fat woman, seated on the bench with a basket between her legs, who had been listening to her husband's narrative with a sad gravity.

"Me? I got nothin' to say," she responded, standing up, "but if yer askin' if he promised, and if he swore, well, yeah, yer honor, he sure did promise the five francs --the liar."

The judge addressed Rousseau: "What do you want, my boy? You made a promise, didn't you? Didn't you swear?"

Rousseau fumbled with his cap, looking rather embarrassed.

"Well, sure! I promised," he said, "but I gotta tell ya, yer honor, five francs? I can't pay it --it's too much! And it ain't worth it. I mean, really!"

"All right, we've got to cut a deal," said the judge. "Five francs, now that might actually be a bit high. Look, Gatelier, how would you feel about, let's say... three francs?"

"No! No way! Not three. Five, jus' like he swore!"

"Think about it, my boy. Three francs is something. And also, Rousseau will buy you a drink in the bargain. Can ya deal with that?"

The two farmers looked at each other.

"That OK wit' you, Rousse?" Gatelier asked.

"After all, ain't we pals?" replied Rousseau.

"OK, it's agreed!" and they shook hands.

"Next case!" yelled the judge, as Gatelier, Mrs. Gatelier, and Rousseau left the room slowly, with backs bent and arms swinging.

END

# THE WALL

OCTAVE MIRBEAU

Translated from the French by Robert Helms

"Le Mur" first appeared in L'Echo de Paris on February 20, 1894

Old man Rivoli had a wall. This wall ran along a road, and it was crumbling badly. The rains and the road mender's pickax had undermined the base. The stones, having come loose, hardly held together any longer, and cracks were opening up. It was beautiful, however, having the look of an ancient ruin. Some irises crowned the top, while figworts, maidenhair, and houseleeks pushed their way through the fissures. Some poppies, too, paraded their frail bodies between cracks in the rubble-stones. But Pop Rivoli was not sensitive to the poetry of his wall, and, after examining it at length, and jiggling some of its loose stones like teeth in the jaws of a poor man, he finally decided to repair it. He had no need of a mason because he had done every job under the sun during his life. He knew how to mix up the mortar just as he knew how to plane down a board, harden a piece of iron, and square a rafter. Besides, a mason costs a lot without necessarily getting the job done. Pop Rivoli bought some lime and mixed it with a little sand on the road at the base of the wall, and gathered some stones from inside his little yard. Having done all that, he put himself to work.

But hardly had he, one morning, thrown a half-trowel of mortar to fill in the first hole, and wedged the first stone



into place, when suddenly he heard a harsh voice call out behind him:

"Hey, Pop, what are you doing there?"

It was the municipal surveyor, making his morning rounds. He carried a game bag on his back, crammed with instruments of geometry, and in his arm he had two levels, painted red and white.

"Ah-hah!" he said after he put his things down on the road bank, "A strict regulation, and you're violating it again. And at your age! Look here --what are you up to?"

Old man Rivoli turned around and said, "Well... I'm fixing my wall --you see how it's coming apart all over..."

"I see it, " replied the surveyor, "but do you have a permit?"

The old man was alarmed and stood up, and now he stood with his hands placed against his stiff back. "A permit, you say? Doesn't my own wall belong to me? Do I need a permit to do as I like with my wall --knock it down or straighten it out if I feel like it?"

Don't get wise, you old rascal. You know the bottom line." "Still," Rivoli persisted , "Is the wall mine --yes or no?"

"The wall is yours, but it's on a road. And you don't have the right to repair a wall which is yours, but is on a road."

"But you can plainly see that it can hardly stand up any more," the old man pointed out, "and if I don't fix it, it'll fall down like a dead man." "That's possible, but it's no concern of mine. I'm writing you a summons, firstly, for repairing your wall without authorization. Secondly, for having, also without authorization, placed materials on a public way. It'll cost you exactly one fifty-ecu piece as a fine, my dear Pop Rivoli. Ha! That'll teach you to use ignorance of the law as an excuse!"

Old Rivoli opened his mouth wide, toothless and black as a furnace. He was so stupefied that he could not utter a single word. His eyes spun around in their sockets like little tops. After a minute he groaned and took his cap off with a gesture of deep discouragement.

"Fifty ecus!" he blurted out, "Lord Jesus, is it possible?"

The municipal surveyor continued: "And that's not all. You must repair your wall."

"No, no. I won't repair it." the old man replied, "It's not worth the fifty ecus. I'll do as I'm supposed to."

"You must fix your wall," the functionary persisted, "because it's in a dangerous state of disrepair, and it'll damage the road when it falls. And remember this well: if your wall comes down, I will write you a new summons, and then you'll need exactly one hundred ecus to pay the fine." Pop Rivoli started to panic. "A hundred ecus! Damn! What is this world coming to?"

"But first, listen up: go and ask, on a stamped document that costs twelve sous, for a permit from the prefect." "I can't read at all," said Rivoli.

"That's not my problem at all. That's it, basically. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Pop Rivoli went back into his house. He didn't know how to solve his dilemma, but he did know that the administration didn't play any games with the poor folks. If he fixed his wall, it would bring on a fifty-ecu fine. If he didn't fix it, then a hundred ecus. They force him to mend the wall and forbid him to mend it at the same time. In either case, he was at fault and he had to pay. His thoughts were tumbling around inside his brain. His head was aching. Feeling the full extent of his impotence and his despair, he sighed:

"And the deputy from Paris told me just the other day that I'm a sovereign citizen, that nothing can be done without me, and that I'm free to do as I please."

He went to ask the advice of his neighbor who was familiar with the law, being a municipal councilor.

"That's how it is, Pop," he said with an air of importance. "It's got to be done this way. And since you don't know how to write, I'd like to do you a small favor: I'm going to write up your petition."

The letter was sent off. Two months went by. The prefect didn't respond. Prefects never respond. They write poetry, they flirt with the wives of tax collectors, and they may even be off in Paris, where they'll spend their evenings at the Olympia with various ambassadors. Each week, the municipal surveyor stopped in front of Pop Rivoli's house.

"Well... got that permit?"

"Still nothing."

"You should send in a duplicate petition."

The duplicates piled up inside the tomb of the prefecture, along with the original petition on its stamped paper and a lot of undisturbed dust. Every day old man Rivoli spotted the mailman coming by on his route, but never stopping at his gate. The cracks in the wall grew wider and longer, the stones detached themselves and rolled onto the road-bank, the mortar crumbled, and the surface lifted off more and more, because there had been a heavy frost in the meantime. The wounds expanded and gnawed away at the poor, half-crumbled wall with their leprosy.

One night when a strong wind was blowing, it collapsed completely. Pop Rivoli noticed the disaster the next morning at dawn. In its fall, the wall had brought down with it the espalier trees from the yard which produced such beautiful fruit in the autumn. Now nothing protected the poor man's residence: the thieves and the vagabonds could come in at any time to catch the chickens and steal the eggs. And then the terrible municipal surveyor came back:

"Ah! Didn't I tell you this would happen? It's fallen down, for Christ's sake! Oh, well! I'm going to write you a summons." The old man wept:

"Is it my fault? Is it my fault? When you prevented me from fixing it?"

"Go on, go on. After all, it's no big deal. With the fifty ecus of the first fine, you'll only have to cover one hundred fifty ecus plus expenses. You can easily pay that."

But old man Rivoli could not pay that. His entire fortune was inside his yard, and in his two arms which eked a living out of his yard to their continual fatigue. The good-natured fellow became somber. He no longer went outside his house, where he remained seated all day long in front of his cold hearth with his head in his hands. The sheriff had come by twice. He had seized the house, and he had seized the yard. In eight days, everything would be sold at auction. Then one evening, Pop Rivoli left his chair by his cold hearth and went down to the cellar, silently, without a lamp. Groping around with his fingers, among the empty cider pipes, the tools, and the baskets, he found a thick rope which served to crimp the drinking casks. Then he went back up into his yard.

In the middle of the yard was a large walnut that spread its gnarled and sturdy branches above the grass, against a sky that had taken on a pearly sheen from the first rays of moonlight. He fastened the rope to one of the higher branches, after climbing into the tree using a ladder and going farther up from branch to branch. Then he tied the rope around his neck and let himself fall like a stone into the void. The rope made a squeak as it squeezed against the branch, and the branch made a small cracking sound. The next day, the mailman brought the permit from the prefect. He saw the hanged man swinging at the end of the rope, inside the yard, among the branches of the tree, where two birds were singing at the top of their lungs.  
[END]

# THE SACRED BIRD

OCTAVE MIRBEAU (1848-1917)

Translated from the French by Robert Helms

"L'Oiseau Sacri" first appeared in the literary supplement of the Paris anarchist paper *La Rivolte* #3 (Sept. 27, 1890), reprinted from *L'Echo de Paris*.

A few leagues from my cottage, in one of the most fertile areas in France, there lies a certain immense property. For only the past ten years the place has belonged to a well-known banker, but it isn't used for hunting parties. The chateau was partly demolished during the first revolution. Nothing remains of it but an uncrowned brick tower and some charred walls that invade the weeds, which grow into trees, and the moss. The banker considered rebuilding it according to its original design, but then abandoned the idea because of the expense involved. He already had an historic estate near Paris that sufficiently accommodated his pride. But here the beautiful and well-preserved outbuildings have been converted into residences, and they make superb figures in the vast park, planted with giant trees, woven with royal lawns that roll down, waving, to meet the Forest of P\_\_\_, which is a State Forest reknowned for its high stands of timber. To the right, at a distance of ten kilometers, interspersed here and there with groves and thickets, lie the lands that depend economically on the estate. The new owner has much aggrandized the primitive place. All around the chateau, he has bought up the fields, the farms, and the meadows, so as to create for

himself a sort of inviolable kingdom, where he could be the sole master --a harsh, implacable master who did not take his property rights lightly. He did not have any political designs on the country. The peasants, lured by the banker's gold, have little by little ceded the soil they once possessed. They have left to work elsewhere. Only a few old people lingered, aside from some woodcutters and paupers. It's sinister, and makes one shudder, to encounter one of them.

I recall looking there as a child, and seeing the fields covered with crops, the grassy meadows, and the farms, from which the alert and joyous sounds of work-songs would escape. How it's all changed, today! I recognize nothing of my old haunts. One could say that a bad wind has passed by, which has dried up the sap of bygone days with its power, destroying all of that generous gait in one stroke: the wheat, the barley, and the oats as well. Even the hedges, big and leafy along the drainage ditches, have been razed. To the left and right of the road, up to the edge of the forest, the fields are symmetrically planted with sombre grey thorn bushes, and here and there, squares of buckwheat and alfalfa had been planted and then left to rot on the stalk. The fences, bristling with their closely pressed wooden pickets, defend the approaches of the untresspassable estate where the pheasant struts about. Here, all is sacrificed to the pheasant, and the pheasant enjoys the style of a sacred bird --a deified bird, nourished by perfumed berries and precious grains that are served by gamekeepers, devoted and vigilant as those ancient priests with braided beards who watched over the sacred ibises in ancient Egypt. Instead of the mossy-roofed farmhouses, there are pinacled kennels comprised of huge, turreted aviaries. The rigid trellises of steel wire

now run along where I, in another time, would see the hazels and the aspen trees climb, ever so thin and light against the sky with their silver leaves. From place to place, the guard houses fire their evil looks onto the countryside from dreaded windows.

The poor people who wander along, and the vagabonds, looking for the night's shelter, pass quickly over this piece of earth, where there is nothing for their fatigue and their hunger, and where the very banks of the roadside ditches are hostile. If by chance a small-time traveling salesman, that misunderstood and pitiful wanderer of the markets and fairs, should linger on these thankless roads, the gamekeepers will soon be chasing him off. They've hardly gotten unhitched, and tethered their skinny nag, just lit a fire out of dead leaves and branches by their wagon, with its poles raised in the air and its awning torn, to cook some potatoes for supper, and already the gamekeepers have arrived.

"Move along, you thieves! What are you doing here?"

"But the road belongs to everybody..."

"And that wood you've stolen --does that belong to everybody? Bullshit! Get moving, or I'll write you a summons!"

Sometimes a pheasant will accompany these menacing words with the mocking sound of its wings.

One sees the sacred creatures in troops behind the trellises, running under the shadowy tufts of the thorn bushes in their little tracks, slipping between the rustling alfalfa stalks, and perching proudly on the fence rails.



They powder themselves with sunlight in the road, insolently wearing the plumage of their ill-gotten wealth. One is obsessed with the pheasant: everywhere you aim your eyesight, you see a pheasant. With shouldered rifles and a savage air, the gamekeepers stand along the road at intervals, and keep watch over the birds which might be crippled by some passing peasant who bashed them with a stick. These men in military caps, who stare at you with a brutal glare, their gun-barrels gleaming, and these fields that are either mowed short or covered with dark leaves, all become an obsession. You forget where you are. It seems that you walk on ravaged, conquered soil, in enemy territory. It brings back evil memories of other times and blurry, painful visions of past defeats. Yes, it's the same sadness, the same silence, the very bereavement of the Earth, the same heaviness below the horizon! What's going to happen? What corpses, what panic, what disasters wait, just past a bend in the road? This recollection of sombre days, of the broad plains we marched over, it enters into your heart, pursues you, and terrifies you. And the spikes of the fences bristling from either side of the road, with the points shining, had me thinking of victorious bayonettes, waving as far as the eye can see, under the implacable cruelty of the sky.

It was very cold that day, and since I'd walked for quite a while, I was thirsty, and so I stopped at the door of a little house that crouched sadly alongside the road and I asked for some milk. At the back of the room there was a man, eating a morsel of greyish bread. He didn't turn around. Some ragged children were swarming around him. A shotgun was mounted above the fireplace. Out of this sad interior there breathed a violent stink of poverty! A baby with a terrified face started crying when he spotted me. Then a woman, the likes of whom I've never

seen, appeared from out of the shadows. She was badly emaciated and wore a tortured expression, like a specter of misery. Her eyes carried a hateful glow so openly murderous that I was intimidated by them. She looked me over for a few mute and terrible seconds, and then, shrugging her shoulders, she said:

"Some milk! You're asking for some milk? Well there's no milk around here! There'd have to be some cows for that! But take a look around! There's plenty of pheasants --the pheasants of sorrow!" She gazed in front of her with a ferocious air, and saw the fields of thorn bushes that stretched into the distance, protecting with their shade and nourishing with their berries the "bird of sorrow" that had taken both her cow and her field away from her.

The man had not lifted his head. Sitting on a stool with his back turned and his elbows on his knees, he continued to chew on his piece of hard bread. On the packed dirt floor, crouching in a tangled heap of skinny gooseflesh, the children were still terrified by my presence and continued to cry. I entered this hovel and was I moved by its poverty.

"You certainly look awful, my friends," I said, handing out some small change to the kids. "Why haven't you left this place? Everyone else is gone."

"And just where would we go?" the woman asked me.

"I don't know --it doesn't matter where. And you have no work here, right?"

"He trims the trees at the chateau, but the bastards fired him because, according to them, he goes out at night, waits behind things till a pheasant comes along, and kills it. Three times now, those thugs have grabbed him and locked him up for eight days at a clip. He just got out again, the day before yesterday."

"Shut up!" the man shouted to his wife, turning the tragic face of a hunted animal in my direction.

"Why should I shut up?"

"Shut up!" he yelled again with an imperious voice.

At that moment, a gamekeeper appeared in the doorway. The woman threw herself in front of him, shaking with anger, to prevent him from entering.

"What do you want here? I won't let you in! You have no right to come in here! Beat it!"

The gamekeeper wanted to come in.

"Don't touch me, you murderer," she shrieked, "don't you dare touch me, or you'll regret it. That's all I've got to say to you!"

The gamekeeper asked, "Is Motteau here?"

"It's none of your business."

"Is Motteau here?"

"What do you want with him this time?"

"Again this morning," the gamekeeper said, "I found a pheasant's feather on the White Road, and I recognized Motteau's footprints on the ground."

"You're lying!" the woman yelled.

"I'm lying?"

"Yes, you're lying."

"No, really, I'm not lying. And tell him to watch out, because the day we catch him, there's gonna be one hell of a..."

"Watch out yourself, you murderer! Thief! Because... because..."

"All right, shut up." Motteau said to his wife. Then, addressing the gamekeeper, he said, "You're making a mistake, Bernard. It's not me. I can't take any more of your jail. It ain't me. I was sick last night. I had a fever. It isn't me."

"I said what I said," the gamekeeper replied. "And that shotgun, over the fireplace! At any rate, we've got to confiscate your..."

"This gun?"

"Yeah, that gun..."

"That's nothing," Motteau explained. "It's just an old shotgun, and it doesn't shoot. No, it's not for your pheasants. Not that gun."

The two men exchanged a look of raw hatred. Then, after throwing me a suspicious look, the gamekeeper repeated,

"I said what I said."

As his wife moaned, Motteau returned to his place on the stool and got lost in a dark dream. Staring at his shotgun, he was saddened by its rusted barrels, and he lurked on vengeful nights in ambush, waiting for the bloody drama in the thorn bushes, underneath the moon.

THE END

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